

Moments in History

Commemorating Women's Role in Canadian History



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Women's
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Mary Ann Shadd

“Free to be.”

This motto, a tribute to the spirit of Mary Ann Shadd, is used by the school in Scarborough, Ontario that bears her name. Over a hundred years after her death, Mary Ann Shadd continues to inspire young people with her legacy.

Born in 1823, in Wilmington, Delaware, Mary Ann Shadd was one of 13 children.

The inhumanity of slavery made life tremendously difficult for Black people during this era. Some tried to escape the American south, often fleeing North with the help of supporters. Many fugitive slaves took the Underground Railroad, a secret network of escape routes, with the hope of reaching freedom in Canada.

In the 1830s, Mary Ann Shadd

and her family made their escape via the Underground Railroad, and finally settled near Chatham, Ontario.

Early on, Mary Ann Shadd became a well-known activist for Blacks, especially in the field of education. She wrote that her only desire:

“...was to get an honest living by teaching persons who have not had opportunities afforded them to learn and at the same time to be privileged to exercise thought and speech as a rational being.”¹

Life as a young teacher was a struggle and a challenge. The Common Schools Act of 1850 allowed for the legal establishment of separate public schools for black and white students. Faced with the implications of this racist legislation, Black parents hired Mary Ann Shadd to establish a private school as a

way of ensuring that their children got a good education. In the fall of 1851, her school opened in Windsor's old and run-down barracks. Ms. Shadd was regarded as an exceptional teacher and praised by the community.

Mary Ann Shadd fought relentlessly against Henry Bibb, publisher of *Voice of the Fugitive*, and founder of the Refugee Home Society. His newspaper provided news and editorial views for Black people who hoped to move back to the United States when freedom came. Ms. Shadd charged that the Society was riddled with abuse. She attacked Bibb in her writings, stirring up much controversy by doing so.

Unfortunately, he responded to her accusations with a counter attack, saying Ms. Shadd had not told the community of a \$125 grant she had received, from an organization to support

1. Daniel Hill, *The Freedom-Seekers, Blacks in Early Canada*, p. 203; from Mary Ann Shadd to George Whipple, January 15, 1853. American Missionary Archives.

her teaching. Financial support was revoked, and in spite of her many gifts and success in teaching, Mary Ann Shadd left Windsor in 1853.

Mary Ann joined her brother Isaac in publishing the *Provincial Freeman*. They proclaimed the *Freeman* "...the enemy of vice and corruption and a promoter of good morals, devoted to anti-slavery, temperance, and general literature."²

Beginning with the first issue on March 25, 1853, the Shadds promoted the cause of Black refugees in Canada and constantly fought against prejudice and colonization schemes. The motto on the paper's masthead reflected its editorial position: *Self Reliance is the True Road to Independence.*³

In its first issue the *Freeman* stated that its goal was to:

...represent the 40,000 Negroes, freedmen, fugitives wealthy and poor, recently arrived in Canada; encourage "the right class" to enter Canada by publishing an account of the country and its advantages; and develop in Canada a society to deny

all assertions regarding the Negro's ability to live with others in a civilized society.⁴

The *Freeman* had correspondents in London, Windsor, Brantford, Toronto and St. Catharines. It had subscribers throughout Canada West and the U.S.A. Eventually, the paper moved to Toronto, and finally to Chatham.

As the *Freeman*'s most charismatic writer and its first full-time editor, Mary Ann Shadd was famous for her cutting editorials and sharp tongue. She is acknowledged as North America's first Black newspaper-woman. She is also credited with being the first female publisher of a newspaper in Canada. The paper's last issue was published in September, 1857.

Following her husband's death in 1860, Mary Ann returned to teaching to support herself and her children. A life-long activist, she recruited "colored" volunteers for the Union Army in Indiana during the American Civil War. Later, in Washington, D.C., she served as public school principal, wrote, and entered Howard University to study law when she was in her forties.

Although she completed her studies in 1872, the university, fearing negative publicity, would not grant Ms. Shadd her law degree until 1881 because she was a woman. As a member of the National Women Suffrage

Association, she organized rallies and lectured. She helped in founding the Washington Colored Women's Progressive Franchise Association. On June 5, 1893, in her seventieth year, Mary Ann Shadd died.

Despite setbacks like the Common Schools Act, Mary Ann Shadd continued to see Canada as a country of opportunity and promise for all races. She was prepared to fight to make that vision a reality.

Mary Ann Shadd will be remembered as a strong Black woman who left a lasting legacy, both professionally and in her personal life: She broke new ground for women in the field of publishing, and had the courage to speak her mind, and stand up for her beliefs and her community. Mary Ann Shadd was indeed "free to be."

Sources

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2. Daniel Hill, *The Freedom-Seekers, Blacks in Early Canada*, p. 203.
3. Daniel Hill, *The Freedom-Seekers, Blacks in Early Canada*, p. 187.
4. Daniel Hill, *The Freedom-Seekers, Blacks in Early Canada*, p. 187; from *The Provincial Freeman*, March 25, 1854.